



News Release

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California State Parks

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California State Parks Consults With Land Use, Wildlife Experts on Oceano Dunes SVRA

California State Parks is utilizing experts in land use and wildlife as it continues to address major issues at the Oceano Dunes State Vehicular Recreation Area (SVRA).

"We have taken these steps to ensure that we are in compliance with all regulations and mandates, as well as to obtain the objective expert guidance that is necessary to protect the western snowy plover and the California least tern," said David L. Widell, deputy director of the Off-Highway Motor Vehicle Recreation (OHMVR) Division of California State Parks.

Specifically, the Division:

- Hired Thomas Reid Associates, Palo Alto-based land use and conservation planners and recognized experts on endangered and threatened species issues;
- Contracted with the Point Reyes Bird Observatory which is providing noted biologists who are supervising and coordinating all monitoring activities that are taking place at ODSVRA; and
- Is working with California State University, Monterey Bay in the preparation of a Habitat Conservation Plan.

"The Division has been working to protect these species for a long time and has developed a cooperative relationship with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and state Department of Fish and Game," said Thomas Reid, president of the firm that bears his name.

"At this stage of planning, our goal is to ensure the ongoing effectiveness of species protection," Reid said.

The Division has conducted an ongoing monitoring program since 1991. However, the Division contracted this year with the Point Reyes Bird Observatory for supervision and coordination of all monitoring activities at ODSVRA in order to obtain the most accurate data possible. Laird Henkel and Phil Persons, acknowledged by many as the best qualified and experienced biologists available for this work, are leading the program.

“It is important that any organization have strong science for the best possible management. That’s what our goal is at Oceano Dunes. We are there to find out what is going on with the birds and to provide that information to the park’s managers,” said Henkel, a plover biologist.

Under the monitoring program, State Parks has committed to a minimum of two monitors on duty daily through the nesting season to implement all monitoring protocols. Snowy plover nesting activity takes place within the non-off highway vehicle use area of ODSVRA in the vicinity of Oso Flaco Creek. This beach area is being monitored bi-weekly during the nesting season.

In another major move, State Parks contracted with California State University, Monterey Bay to develop a multi-species Habitat Conservation Plan. The far-reaching HCP is addressing conservation of the species on a regional basis and will define specific management protocols that will be incorporated into the operations of all State Parks along the San Luis Obispo County coastline within Oceano Dunes and San Luis Obispo Coast Districts.

Knowledgeable biologists view the ODSVRA plover monitoring and recovery effort as a model program and on a par with similar efforts that are underway at Monterey Bay by the university.

CSU Professor Robert K. Burton, PhD, who is working on the HCP, called the work that is being done at ODSVRA “one of the most well developed and comprehensive management programs in California” for the snowy plover. He said this long-running program, in existence for the last 10 years, “is an important source of information” in the development of the regional HCP.

This remains an important time at ODSVRA. It is one of California’s most popular parks, and the summer season coincides with the nesting seasons for the western snowy plover, a species listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act since 1993, and the endangered California least tern. These small birds nest on the bare sands within the recreation area. Although their nests are protected within fenced areas, they can still be disturbed by inappropriate visitor activities.

Snowy plovers are small, pale-colored shorebirds with dark patches on either side of the upper breast. The birds are not limited to California’s central coast. The coastal population, of which the US Fish and Wildlife Service says roughly 2,000 individuals remain, breeds along the Pacific coast from southern Washington to southern Baja California, Mexico. The breeding season extends from early March to late September. Snowy plover nests are similar to those of least terns, but are more often lined with fragments of shells or pebbles.

Oceano Dunes SVRA represents the last 5-½ miles of beach along California’s 1,100 miles of coastline where motorized recreation is still allowed.

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